

Back Again, Back Again: Birthdays, Failings

Abigail, As the Preroll: Hello hello hello! Before we begin today's episode, we have a listener limerick from Baguette, about - Baguettes!

Made from a dough that is lean
It's a symbol of french cuisine
Though origin contested
This bread can't be bested
The baguette's the absolute queen

Thank you so, so much for your support!

If you, too, would like a silly and mostly terrible limerick about a topic of your choice, you, too, can check out Ko-fi.com/backagainpodcast, where, if you leave an arguably pg-13 topic in the description box, I'll write you something awful. Thank you so much again to Baguette, and - onto the episode!

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode eighteen: Birthdays, Failings.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

And then - it was, very suddenly, by my very best estimation, September twenty-fourth. I was terrified and just as superstitious as I am in the here-and-now about birthdays.

Let's see. *Should* we examine all of my superstitions in the here-and-now? Should we draw back the curtain and ponder how I mark time and mark time and mark time instead of actually *living*, out of some stupid fear that if I get too comfortable here I will never be allowed to leave? That first birthday, when in Rhysea - *gods*, was I afraid to go to bed. It's my own bit of prophecy, the closest I ever got to having a poet's grace - in a vague way, I predicted the morning of my simultaneous first twenty-third and second seventeenth birthdays - bolting upright to find my clock flashing back at me, past midnight, a new day, world very and horrifically normal. Rhysea a beautiful dream, quick to fade away.

I was right on several counts and wrong on one. Maybe someday the fading will happen quickly. For now, I'm still a fool, which means I'm still holding on.

It's just - it's been so long. It's been - years, listener. And yet - I march in place. I mark time.

I don't think I've ever told you about the night before my eighteenth birthday, here, in this world. My second-eighteenth-birthday. The parallel to the Rhysean one I am about to have in our narrative. I'd *genuinely* - ha, *genuinely* - believed that it would happen that night. *It*. My way back. I went to sleep before midnight -- a handful of minutes. I -- (laughs) I wore armor to sleep, my Rhysean clothes. Do you know how uncomfortable that is? I just thought -- maybe the veil -- the Rhysean equivalent of the veil, the - you know, the *wormhole* or whatever it was -- *it* would be thinnest on my - anniversary. That it would give me the best shot. So I gathered up all the luck I could and I *hoped* -

And I turned eighteen again anyways. And I got up and went to school. And I threw myself a pity-party on the floor of my room afterwards, definitely not spiraling at all, and watched Narnia and allowed myself to cry only those stupid laying-on-your-side tears that appear whether or not you're sad.

Now I'm nineteen. I won't pretend that I didn't have an almost identical day a few months ago. Except - I skipped class

and, after waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night, still hoping against hope that I would have woken up somewhere other than my room, I chucked my armor to my apartment floor and tried not to scream my disappointment and went back to bed until well past noon.

Marking time versus living. *Ha*. I don't even know what the latter would look like. Calling something *home* with all your chest and actually meaning it? Making friends that you don't hesitate to get closer than two feet apart from?

Let's see - in this life, in this life. I am just like every other university student, hesitating and tripping over calling the place I am living *home*. Because is it? *Is it?* Is *home* the place you live or the place you're from or the place that makes your throat close up when you're away from it? Is *home* a person that you love? Can it be a place you've been only once? Can it be a place that you can never go back to?

I am like every university student, hesitating and tripping over calling the place I am living *home*. I am also unknowable and impossible, because *home* is people and places and a whole other world that I saw for less than ten minutes of this one.

I am like every other university student. I went to fresher's week events and made plans with people I'd never talk to again and joined clubs because as much as I can't deal with the differences in this world and these *people*, children,

really, who still feel like they have a future in front of them, something to reach out and grab onto, I cannot stand to be alone. I play DnD with coworkers and go every Thursday evening and Sunday morning to a campus writing club where I listen to other people's works and never share anything of my own - because, god, what a mortification that would be, because, gods above, most of my frantic scribbling is still just this, vomiting up my own history before I forget - but still, and still, and still, I cannot shake the urge that if I allow myself to grow roots stronger than what it takes to keep standing that I will not be able to be carried away when the time comes.

That is still the only future I can think up. Rhysea or nothing at all. Rhysea or - I don't know what could even come next.

I want to be selfless, listeners. I want to say *if the price of freedom, of the fretim's success, of my - home - being remade was my own exile, I am happy to pay it. One person's pain for the lives of a million people* - but the words stick in my throat when I say them in anything but the hypothetical. In the abstract, it's worth it every damn time. In practice - I am tired. I am lonely. I would give up - nearly anything to go home. My magic. My sight. My tongue and teeth and as much of every part of me that I could while still breathing. I don't

think I'd care if every step was screaming pain, knives and agony. I don't think I would even hesitate before saying yes.

But I stay here, and stay here, and stay here. I was always so afraid that this was where I'd end back up.

It was September twenty-third, by my best estimate, counting days out of this exact fear, and I did not want to go to sleep. Do you know how terrified I was? The day that my birthday came, in Rhysea, to the best of my knowledge? I mean. I've read the stories. Everything in chosen-child stories is cyclical, is it not? Find the lamppost, push through coats the same way you did before. Stumble over your siblings and emerge eight years old. Back to the beginning. I always knew, somewhere deep inside me, that my birthday would be my wardrobe, be my lamppost - but that was not a plot of land I could forever skitter around. Time marches on, and the day loomed, and I feared it, and feared it, and feared it.

Time marches on, even if we think we are holding still. I stayed awake, clinging to the pretense of being on watch, fear half-choking me, vice grip round my throat, till the sunrise came.

But this was Rhysea, listeners. This was the good world. So, of course, I did not sit alone.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outtro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that you do not have to fill your days with action and creation to be worthy of the space you take up. You were made already whole.

The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.

